

Gettysburg Address Still Resonates

by Tom Emery

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Seldom have two minutes meant so much.

November 19 marks the anniversary of the Gettysburg Address, a two-minute oration that is considered among the greatest speeches in American history.

The address was part of ceremonies to dedicate a soldiers' cemetery at Gettysburg, where the epic Civil War battle had been fought four months before, on July 1-3, 1863. Edward Everett, the Massachusetts politician and famous orator who had run against Lincoln in the 1860 election, was to deliver the main address.

The President's appearance was almost an afterthought. On November 2, Gettysburg lawyer David Wills, who created the cemetery and organized the ceremony, invited Lincoln to add "a few appropriate thoughts."

Lincoln, two personal secretaries, and three Cabinet members took the train from Washington to Gettysburg the day before the ceremony, and the President spent the night in Wills' home.

Thursday, Nov. 19, 1863, proved warm and bright, and Lincoln led a procession to the cemetery, which contained only a third of its eventual 3,512 graves. The others had yet to be moved from their scattered burials across the battlefield.

An audience of over 15,000 heard a stirring two-hour oration from Everett, followed by the President. In a mere 272 words and ten sentences, Lincoln summarized the meaning of the Civil War and why the war must be fought and won.

Lincoln began his address with the famous words "four score and seven years ago," or eighty-seven years, referring to the 1776 Declaration of Independence that he considered the basic document in American history. His oration is also cited for both its Biblical references and its moral tone.

"It was like a sermon," said Dr. Wayne Temple, a nationally respected Lincoln authority from Springfield, Ill. "There was a definite religious tone to his words. In many ways, he spoke from the soul."

Contrary to popular myth, Lincoln did not scribble the speech on the back of an envelope on the train trip from Washington. An early draft was partially completed in the White House on executive mansion stationery. Lincoln wrote the remainder at Wills' house the night before the ceremony.

Some medical researchers believe Lincoln was on the cusp of a mild case of smallpox. He had complained of weakness on the train trip, and his personal secretary John Hay remembered Lincoln's face as "a ghastly color" during the address. He was sickly that evening and ill for several weeks afterward.

The President was also burdened by the sickness of his young son, Tad, in Washington. First Lady Mary Lincoln, remembering the loss of another Lincoln child the previous year, believed the President should skip the Gettysburg appearance in case he was needed at home. She sent periodic telegrams with updates on Tad's condition while her husband was in Gettysburg.

The audience response is debated. Some historians, such as Shelby Foote, label the reaction "barely polite." Other onlookers were unaware that the President's speech had even begun, and were surprised that it was finished.

However, many believe the speech was well-received, and that Lincoln quickly detected that reaction. Dr. James Cornelius, the former Curator of the Lincoln Collection at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, notes that the crowd showed its appreciation.

"There was a hesitation after he spoke, and that may have been partly due to the brevity of the address," said Cornelius. "But the audience clearly responded well. Reliable sources indicate there was a stomping of feet, cheers, and applause."

Also debated is Lincoln's opinion of his performance. Ward Hill Lamon, a former Lincoln bodyguard who was marshal for the event, wrote that the President told him afterward the speech "won't scour," a reference to plowing.

Cornelius, though, argues that the President had "obvious pride in the speech. The New York and Washington papers reprinted the speech in its entirety, and the response is reflected in the number of handwritten copies that were requested of Lincoln."

A total of five personal copies were requested. Everett was among them, writing Lincoln the next day that "I should be glad...if I came as near the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes." Everett's copy is held at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield.

Reaction in the media was split along party lines. The Democratic Chicago Times, long a critic of the President, called the speech "silly, flat, and dishwatery." Others in the press were moved. The Springfield (Mass.) Republican declared it "a perfect gem," and the Chicago Tribune wrote the address "will live in the annals of man."

Today, most historians consider the Gettysburg Address one of Lincoln's two greatest orations, along with his second inaugural.

“Lincoln reminded people that the Union was worth fighting for,” said Cornelius. “As his words said, a new birth of freedom was coming. The many who had died could not be allowed to die in vain, and those freed by the Emancipation Proclamation could not be allowed to taste freedom only briefly.”

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